

## La Arena — Pisaflores, HGO

### From Ann Soden

CIASP was a defining time in my life.

I became a person of the world, an adventurer, one who had traveled and had lived amongst people who had no concept of Canada (except that it must be many, many mountains away) nor had even, in some instances, seen white people before. I had had a privilege few others would have. If my life or abilities were cut short, I had, at least, made a tiny contribution to community development and international good will of which I could be proud.

I gained confidence in my survival techniques, spirit of adventure and ruggedness. I learned and honed skills and values I have applied all my life: resourcefulness and resilience; commitment, and caring, inclusiveness and perspective; sensitivity to the world and the plight of others; realization of our basic communality; and passion for life, new horizons, and new cultures. I learned about the true poor and how the poorest of the poor can be happy and proud. I learned the value of grassroots organizations and the limitations of importing foreign aid and customs. I learned how to organize conferences and fundraisers. I learned that to those to whom much is given, much is expected. I learned the importance of leaving each place a little better for having been there. I learned that in giving to others, one discovers oneself. I learned that we get back so much more than we give.

I learned many lessons of tolerance, patience, generosity, humility, appreciation of nature and of life taught to us by our Mexico friends: the beauty of an earthen floor well swept, that pride of doing ones best and making the best of what little one has, and literally raising it to a different level. All these have stayed with and guided me always.

How enriched we were!

The lessons are endless, but best of all are the rich memories of our wonderful Mexican brothers and sisters: Don Flavio of La Arena on his fine horse, wearing an embroidered sombrero; his grandchildren Zainaida, Placido and Incarnacion, now in their 50s and great-grandparents, I expect, if, God willing, they are still alive. I remember the fabulous refried *frijoles con huevos*, served with coarse salt, scooped up by mountains of hot tortillas; the sweet sugar cane, *pilon* and *galletas*; our Mexican house mother washing our hair with sweet leaves, and teaching us to sculpt red earthen clay pots; walking six hours over mountains to a marriage where we were the honored guests and had to partake [or embarrass our host] in eating chicken marinated for days in hot chili; the singing at the *missa* of "*Somos Cristianos y Somos Mexicanos, viva, viva Jesu, nuestro rey*" and the "*Sanctus*"; the strains of Mexican guitars on cool nights; visiting the *camposanto* and the grateful looks when we "cured" *granos* (sometimes), or toothaches with oil of cloves and backaches with aspirin; being called "Anita Blanca" my first

year, and "Donna Anita", my second year when I become in the eyes of our Mexican hosts, a real Mexican; *arri-ti-ti-a!* and *tardes*; being sent home with chickens and eggs because the Mexicans thought it was very sad that my mum had none in Canada; the people from our rancho who accompanied us to the highway and nearby town when we left and slept in their first bed and sheets and took their first bath and shower; getting sick and being given "*aquadiante*" by our Canadian priest and thinking I was going to die for a couple a days from the effects of this "remedy"; being ordered to Pisaflores to recuperate under the watchful eye of the Pauline Proulx; the young Doctor from Mexico City doing his required *stage* in the country and assisting him in a surgery, without anesthetic, to remove a massive cyst in a mans face, while this man bit on a piece of wood; teaching young teenage girls how to teach writing and reading to youngsters in the rancho during those many months when the itinerant teacher was not in residence; trying to convince, without success, the men of the neighboring ranchos to pool a few *pesos* to purchase a coffee-bean shucking machine in order to get a better price at market and they refusing because they did not understand the notion of a cooperative and because, they explained, they were poor and would always be poor; narrowly escaping being bitten by a viper which passed behind my foot, as I walked on a path; walking in the pouring rain on mountain paths at night and galloping down streams and across rivers with the same priest; wonderful camaraderie with all the great CIASP workers; sleeping on the floor and in the luggage rack on our bus ride to Mexico; the convent where we stayed; the Ballet Folklorico, the Museum of Anthropology and Acapulco; the death of the first black girl to join our ranks- a beautiful, selfless girl who suffered in silence in a far-off rancho not wanting to call attention to herself until it was too late; who hailed from the working-class district of St. Henri, Montreal, the first of her family to attend university; who was about to graduate and marry and whose Caribbean mother feared for her safe return but relented because her daughter wanted so much to go to Mexico and because we leaders had insisted on the safety of this venture, never suspecting, in our youth and idealism, that sometimes things can go wrong, even when you are doing good.